Mortar Support in the Korean Defile

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Providing mortar support for an armor task force on today's fast-paced battlefield is a very difficult mission, and this is particularly true in mountainous terrain like that in Bosnia or Korea. Fighting in the restrictive terrain of Korea requires a high degree of coordination and a flexible tactical approach to providing effective supporting fires.

Restrictive terrain is defined as terrain that hinders movement to some degree. *Severely* restrictive terrain is that which hinders or slows movement in combat formations unless some ef-

fort is made to improve mobility. This can mean either committing engineer assets to the task or deviating from doctrinal tactics, such as moving in columns instead of line formations or at slower speeds than might be preferred.

In Korea, the 2d Battalion, 72d Armor, 2d Infantry Division, used an assessment of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time) to develop a method of effectively employing mortars in offensive operations in restrictive terrain:

Mission. The most important mission a tank-heavy task force can be expected to execute in a war in Korea is a counterattack against a hasty defense. A movement to contact, for example, requires the greatest flexibility in tactics and a METT-T assessment of the best way to apply doctrine to the situation at hand. In the 2d Battalion, this first offensive engagement is the attack from the march (Figure 1). The task force, marching in its column 7.5 kilometers long, makes contact with the enemy at the entrance of a defile, attacks to gain a foothold within the defile, then fights through to exit the defile and either establish a defense or continue the penetration.

Enemy. The North Korean threat that an armor task force could expect to see in the defile would consist of VTT-323 armored personnel carriers, T-55 tanks, T-62 tanks, light amphibious tanks, truck-mobile infantry units, dismounted rocket-propelled grenade and antitank weapons teams, artillery groups of various sizes, and special operations teams. An important fact to remember is that the North Koreans do not yet have thermal sight capabilities for their tank and antitank weapon systems.

Terrain. The restrictive terrain is what makes Korea such a difficult place in which to fight; in general, this is a larger factor in executing tactics than the disposition of either enemy or friendly troops. Mountainous terrain dominates the Korean peninsula, with fewer and fewer trafficable roads as you move north. Mobility corridors are often reduced to a single-lane road, and battlesight ranges drop to less than 400 meters for the M1A1 tank. Numerous rivers and streams, combined with sprawling urbanization and swamp-like rice paddies, make the terrain difficult or impassable during the rainy season and channels movement during most other times. The broken, mountainous topography helps the enemy find keyhole positions to counter superior U.S. technology. (A keyhole position is one in which the defender cannot be seen until after the enemy passes in front of him and presents his flank; this usually gives the defender only three to six seconds to fire.)

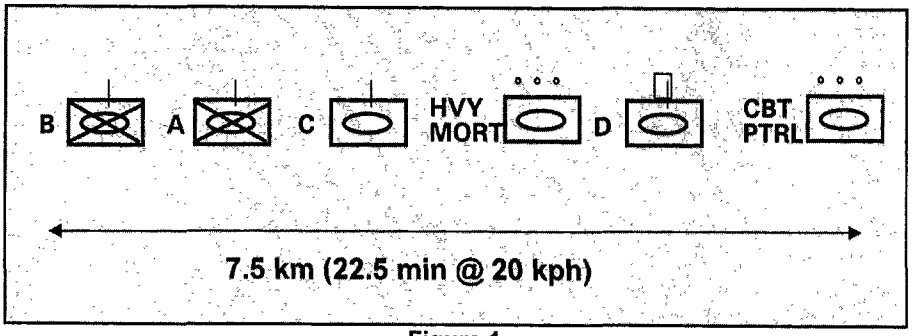

Figure 1

Troops. For friendly troops, the armor task force has six organic 120mm track-mounted heavy mortar systems. These mortars have a maximum effective range of 7,200 meters and are manned by approximately 35 soldiers (MOS 11C). The most important planning factors to consider in this area are survivability and the Class V (ammunition) required supply rate. (The carrier is in the M113 family of vehicles, lightly armored, and armed with a .50 caliber machinegun. The M1064A3 120mm mortar carrier carries only 69 rounds.)

"Never depend completely on the strength of the terrain and consequently never be enticed into passive defense by a strong terrain."
General Carl von Clausewitz

Time. Time is the most difficult planning factor to evaluate for warfare in Korea, and time is against an armored task force attacking into the defile. The faster it can muster its forces and mount an attack, the less time the defenders have to prepare to counter the technological advantages of the M1A1 tanks. But the longer the task force has to prepare for its attack, the more combined arms assets it can employ, and the better coordination it can make for conducting operations.

Using this METT-T assessment, the 2d Battalion formulated a way to make the most of its mortar platoon's indirect fire support. The method first takes into account the terrain and the movement constraints it places on the task force. With the task force in column on a single-lane road, the mortar platoon may never be in range to provide supporting fires if it is placed too far back in the order of march. The mortars must be far enough forward to range the enemy but far enough back to keep from leading the task force into an engagement area. Therefore, the mortars in the 2d Battalion move immediately behind the task force command group, which follows the lead company.

For survivability, the mortars can operate in split sections. Despite their separation, and because of the narrow defile, both sections can quickly mass, as a platoon, on targets along the length of the defile. To meet the ammunition requirements of an intense defile fight, a five-ton truck with a second load of Class V follows closely behind the trail section. Pre-positioned ammunition stores are used before the line of departure, if possible.

Next, taking into account the enemy's lack of a thermal sight capability, the mortars use an equal number of smoke and high-explosive (HE) rounds to blind and confuse him in the defile. To increase responsiveness, all poten-

tial keyhole positions are templated within the defile, and key enemy positions from the template are targeted. As the lead elements of the task force (scouts or combat patrol) move toward these keyhole positions, the commander determines whether to fire smoke or HE rounds or to allow the tanks to clear with direct fire. The standard procedure requires that the mortars suppress all likely keyhole positions in sequence in front of the lead tank. Bounding mortar sections can cover all priority targets throughout the defile.

At the point in the opening engagement where the scouts (or the combat patrol) find the enemy element they need to destroy to gain a foothold into the defile, they send a codeword call (TRP ZULU) over the task force net. This codeword gives the composition and location of the enemy force and becomes the task force's priority target. All mortar fires will then concentrate on this target, suppressing and smoking it until it can be engaged by direct fire. If bounding forward when this call for fire comes, a section will conduct a "hipshoot" and converge its fires onto the enemy location with those of the stationary section.

Throughout the defile fight, the mortars must maintain a clear picture of the priorities of fire and follow the flow of the fight; they may be required to provide support for the scouts, the combat patrol, the lead company or team of the task force, the breach company, the assault company, or the reserve company. Mortars should plan to suppress dismounts, disrupt lightly armored vehicle formations, smoke enemy tanks or antitank assets, or smoke suspected enemy observation points or keyhole positions.

Once the task force has its foothold in the defile, the lead team continues to move through the center. (The main battle begins with the scouts moving into the defile and reconnoitering the location of the enemy's obstacles and antitank ambush site. They call smoke missions that signal the beginning of the breach by the breach company.) The enemy antitank ambush will be the mortar platoon's primary targets. The

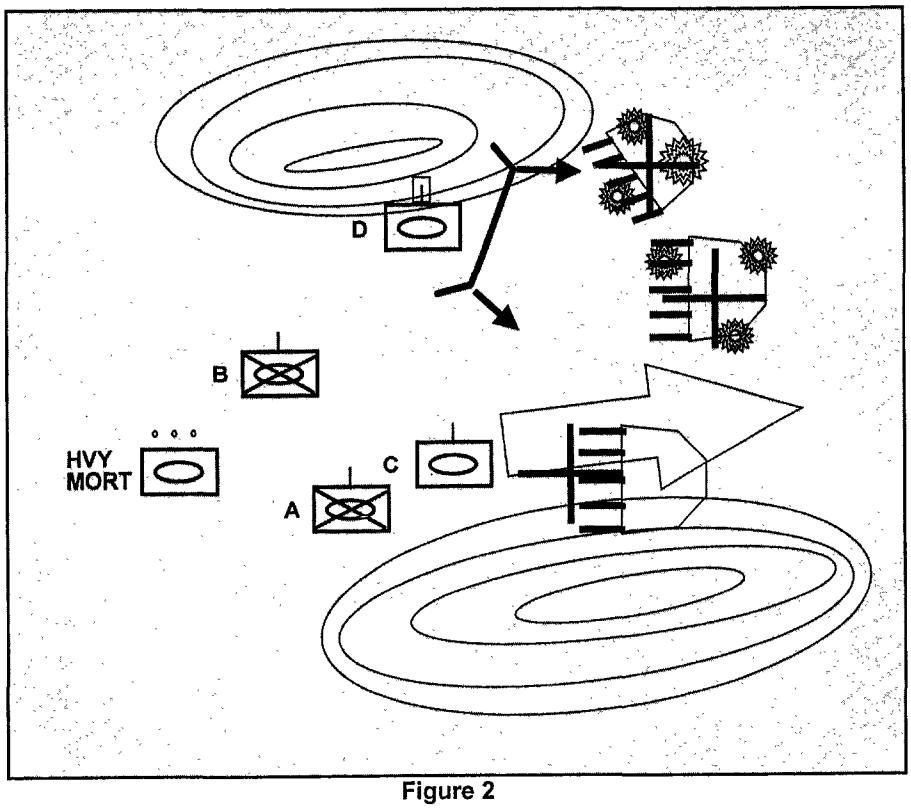

Figure 2

mortars will conduct the "hipshoot" and converge platoon fires onto observed enemy positions and observation points, attempting to blind, confuse, and destroy the enemy in place while the breach team does its job.

The final phase in the attack through the defile is the exit battle, which begins once the breach company has cleared the obstacle for the task force. Since the enemy is no longer in the defile, this is the point where the enemy defense will have both depth and width while the task force will have a minimum frontage.

This is the most critical point in the battle for the mortars. The lead element of the task force will once again choose the enemy element that it must destroy to penetrate the defense and exit the defile. The codeword call (TRP ZULU) again goes out on the task force net, and the mortars immediately concentrate fires with smoke and HE onto this enemy position (Figure 2). Once the direct-fire weapon systems have converged on the enemy, however, the mortars must shift with smoke and HE onto enemy elements in position to flank the task force's tanks emerging from the defile. Once the friendly forces have exited the defile and suppressed or destroyed the remaining opposition, the task force will either continue the attack or establish an L-shaped ambush in anticipation of a counterattack.

Mortars can make the difference between victory and defeat in restrictive terrain. The 120mm mortar platoon is the task force commander's "hip-pocket" artillery. Used to its full potential, it can be devastating in a limited battlespace. This scenario is just one of many ways to approach the unique problems of fighting in the Korean defile. It represents a methodology that can be taught rapidly, it uses commonly trained combat skills, and it embraces current doctrine while introducing innovative ideas for approaching combat situations in Korea.

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